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ABSTRACT

Support for student learning during distance education experiences is often provided by local site facilitators or tutors. The University of Utah has utilized rural master special education teachers as local site facilitators to assist faculty with various aspects of distance education in its teacher education program. Recently, distance site facilitators participated in a focus group discussion to identify critical components of successful television teaching. Specifically, the rural facilitators were asked what makes a difference in the effectiveness of television instruction. The focus-group interview was transcribed and three main themes were identified. First, facilitators had much to say about instructional factors contributing to the success of telecourses. These factors include the ability of students at distance sites to hear and answer questions, instructional pacing, use of visual support materials, instructor availability to students and the facilitator, live interactions between teacher and distance students, formation of study groups, the nature of the introductory session, course support materials, and teacher's speech articulation. Second, facilitators talked about important production and technical attributes of video-based learning programs, including camera work, visual support materials as a break from the "talking head," and microphones and other audio factors. Finally, the facilitators discussed their own roles in supporting the instructor and the course and in supporting students, and their need for communication and guidance from the instructor. (SV)

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ED 406 123

QUALITY TELEVISION INSTRUCTION: VIEWS OF ON-SITE RURAL FACILITATORS

Introduction

A critical factor in the success of distance learning experiences for students is the kind of support they receive for their learning (Sherry, 1995). Support for student learning is often provided by local site facilitators or tutors. The role played by the facilitator may vary depending on program demands, but it always involves direct contact with learners that is designed to mediate the learning experience (Thorpe, 1994).

The University of Utah has utilized local site facilitators in the development of the Distance Teacher Preparation program in Special Education. Rural master special education teachers were prepared as site facilitators to assist faculty with several aspects of the teacher preparation program (Sebastian, 1995). During the delivery of video taped courses, facilitators coordinate learning activities, lead class discussions, support students' completion of assignments, communicate with on the campus faculty, and handle other program management issues at the local site. Facilitators also help to contextualize the course content for students as they begin to integrate the information into their teaching practice with students with disabilities. Additionally, facilitators provide teacher trainees with assistance and support in their special education classrooms (Sebastian, Egan, Welch, & Page, 1996).

Recently, distance site facilitators were asked to participate in a focus group discussion designed to help program developers identify critical components of successful television teaching. Program developers felt that because of their unique role in the support of distance course work, facilitators could provide useful insights in terms of effective television teaching. Rural facilitators were invited to the university campus to talk about their experiences with video-based courses (Krueger, 1988). Specifically, they were asked: " What makes a difference in the effectiveness of television instruction?" The focus group interview was transcribed and the following themes were identified: (1) instructional factors, (2) production and technical issues, and (3) the role of the facilitators. In the following discussion each of these themes will be discussed and illustrated.

Instructional factors

Facilitators had a great deal to say about the instructional factors that contribute to the success of telecourses. Their comments and suggestions focused on factors such as hearing and answering questions, instructional pacing, using discussion groups, and other related elements. Each factor will be briefly addressed in the sections that follow:

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Hearing and answering questions. It was clear that facilitators want telecourse instructors to repeat questions and comments made by students. Several reasons were given for this suggestion. Often, student questions and comments in studio classrooms were not completely understood by telecourse students. This frequently depended on the microphones used or the distance between the student speaking and the microphone. Nevertheless, facilitators wanted instructors to repeat or paraphrase all comments made by students in the studio classroom. As one facilitator put it, "It makes a difference if the instructor will repeat the questions that students are asking so that we can hear them."

Instructional pacing. Facilitators made several comments about instructional pacing. They were particularly concerned about the time devoted to student discussions, particularly in telecourses delivered via video tape. Facilitators wanted to know if they should "fast forward" these discussion or let them play. Sometimes, playing these discussions produces student boredom. Two facilitators described their views as follows: "The pacing is important, especially if they are going to do a class discussion that we don't need to watch. It is helpful if the instructor says all right we are going to do a 15 minute discussion, and then we can fast forward through that and do the discussion on our own." Another facilitator put it this way, "We are all adults. We do not need as many repetitions. They need to keep moving and say what they need to say."

As a final note to this section, facilitators noted that it was helpful when instructors concluded the classroom discussion with a summary of the major points. This summary helped distance students receive important feedback about the accuracy and completeness of their own discussion. Moreover, facilitators would like to know in advance how much time will be devoted to cooperative learning activities and discussion groups. In this regard, they suggested that these group activities be clearly identified in the telecourse support materials.

Visuals and instructor movement. Facilitators appreciated instructors who use relevant visuals and visually-oriented support materials such as videos, charts, and graphs. They also commented on the importance of instructor movement. "I think some kinds of visual aids are important. I know that it would be difficult with this kind of situation, but sometimes that will motivate or catch the interest of the students because it's sometimes boring just to watch, you know, the professor's face. And that is all you see for two or three hours, and there is very little movement. If he could move to the other side of the room and point to a chart or something, I think that helps keep the attention of the students."

Instructor availability. Often distance students and facilitators needed to communicate with instructors. Facilitators wanted instructors to establish telephone office hours for themselves and students. At the least, facilitators wanted instructors to have phone mail systems that allowed them and their students to leave messages. One facilitator summarized her views in this manner: "It is sometimes difficult to get through to them (instructors) or to get them to call back. . . you end up calling several times and sometimes get an answer, and sometimes you don't." Another facilitator said, "I did mention it to one professor and he suggested calling him at certain hours which was really helpful. If you call me between such and such a time, I'm always in my office at that time, and that seemed to help."

Interaction with the instructor. Facilitators expressed several views about interacting with instructors, particularly real time, live interaction. Even if the live interaction occurred just a few times during the beginning of the course; it seemed to make a big difference for students who had not had the instructor for previous courses. This view was captured in the following statement: "I think interaction both with the professor and within the class and with the facilitator is a key, especially on the classes where the students haven't worked with that professor, live interaction is mandatory." This was the view of several facilitators as they thought about their experiences with their students at a distance. These live interactions could take place on site or through two-way interactive television. Another facilitator put it this way. "You can have the toughest class, but if the teacher had been right there in the room with them to start or at different points in the program, I've noticed the students will work harder than if it is just something strictly over a tape. If there has been no interaction, the students feel like well I don't have to put too much effort into this one. Their attitude is a lot different."

Formation of study groups. Facilitators described the natural formation of study groups within the distance cohort. They believed that these groups played a significant role in the learning that occurred. One facilitator said, "As far as the interactions with the student themselves, they automatically put themselves into study groups. Almost every time, they end up studying together or working on assignments, getting feedback from each other." Specifically, these groups played a crucial role in clarifying student and instructor questions, helping students prepare for exams and assignments, and delivering feedback about the adequacy and accuracy of assignments.

Introductory and subsequent telecourse sessions. Several facilitators spoke about the first session of a telecourse. Many were concerned that too much time was devoted to introducing the studio classroom participants and responding to general questions. These views were mirrored in the following statement: "I hate the introductory class session, because so much of the time is spent answering questions from the studio class and also introducing everybody. Well, we are not dealing with those people. As a group we basically know each other. . . A lot of time I can reduce them down to about a 15 minute session and say see you next week guys." Clearly, the first sessions of each respective telecourse need to be constructed with the distance learner in mind.

Course support materials and interactive presentation guides. Facilitators were supportive of course materials that promoted engagement and "sense making." They liked course materials that helped students remain attentive and engaged. One facilitator described these materials in this way, "Some instructors send out almost an outline for each session, like Session Two, [they identify topics] leaving spaces for students to put their notes." Facilitators appreciated support materials that helped students understand the organization of the course and the assignments that needed to be completed. Additionally, they wanted support materials that matched the various course sessions. " We still get materials that don't match the tapes."

Other concerns were also raised about support materials. Facilitators wanted course materials that were pertinent to the course. In some instances, they felt that some course packets contained materials that were not necessary.

Essential professor behaviors. Facilitators identified several professor behaviors that were crucial to the learning process. The first of these related to articulation. "Some professor are much better at being very articulate and very clear. Their voices are just easier to hear and understand. I don't know if there is any control over that, but maybe if they knew it was important, it make a real difference how they come across on the video."

Other facilitators commented on "instructor nervousness." One facilitator put it this way, "It was good that she said that [she was scared to death], otherwise some of her nervousness would have been distracting, but they [students] were very understanding after she said that.

Production Factors

Facilitators talked about important production and technical attributes of video-based learning programs. These attributes are discussed in the next sections.

Camera work. Facilitators had strong views about what should be seen and portrayed on the screen. For example, when a student in the on-campus classroom studio is speaking or responding to a question, facilitators and their students want to see the individual.

Some instructors used "character generated" materials. These represented the television substitutes for overhead transparencies. In general, facilitators wanted camera operators and directors to provide more time for students at distance to process the character generated materials. The same thing holds true for instructors who used a chalkboard or other devices to convey written or graphical information. One facilitator expressed her views in this way: "The new CGs on the last tapes were really good but if they could leave them up longer that would help my students."

Other facilitators commented about the "shot selection" during the telecourse sessions. They indicated that students enjoyed seeing "cut aways" to students who were in the on-campus class. These "cut aways" provided some visual variety. In this same vein, facilitators noted that students wanted producers to give them a lot of different "looks." Said one facilitator, "It would be nice to have some close ups, some long shots, some different angles, so that you wouldn't always get a straight shot of the instructor."

Visual materials. Facilitators indicated that students really appreciated visually-oriented materials. These materials added interest to the presentation or lecture and often increased students' motivations for attending. In also gave students a break from the "talking head" perspective. Also, facilitators wanted instructors and the technical personnel to work as a team in displaying or bringing up visuals and related written materials.

Microphones and audio elements. Several facilitators spoke about the importance of hearing student comments and questions. Often because of the placement of microphones or the type of microphone used in studio classrooms, students at a distance did not hear what was being said or asked. Facilitators recommend that all comments and questions be repeated or at least paraphrased by instructors. This repeating or paraphrasing really "made a difference" in how distance students felt about telecourse sessions in which considerable dialogue occurred between the instructor and studio classroom students.

Role of Facilitators

An important theme that emerged from the analysis of the focus groups was information related to the role of the facilitator. Facilitators identified a number of their own behaviors which should be developed to support television instruction. They discussed three aspects of the role of distance facilitator. First they talked about how they supported the instructor and course activities, particularly in relation to maintaining ongoing communication with the campus instructor. They also talked about student support and how that was related to student success with the course and program. Finally they talked about ways to provide training and assistance to facilitators.

Support for course and instructor. Facilitators indicated that they needed to be very knowledgeable about the overall course content and specific material covered by each class session. By previewing the taped sessions before class, facilitators were able to anticipate questions and allow time for discussion. As one facilitator noted, "I find myself doing a lot of clarifying. They [students] will ask, 'now what was that or what did he mean by that?', so I do quite a bit..."

Facilitators were also able to help students apply course content to actual situations in the rural school district. "Sometimes too, depending on the class, it is helpful for us to be able to put the tape on pause for a moment and relate the point the professor just made to how we do it in our district. What does this mean for our site?" In this way, facilitators served as "localizers" for course content and special education practices.

Facilitators also served as an important liaison between the faculty member on campus and the students. They called instructors for clarification on issues discussed by the distance class and for instructions on assignments. Facilitators reported occasional difficulty reaching campus faculty. To alleviate this problem some faculty set up "telephone" office hours that helped facilitate communication between the distance site and campus. Voice mail messages were also used to relay questions and concerns from the distance cohort to the professor.

Student support. Supporting students was identified by facilitators as a very important aspect of their role. Learning at a distance is challenging at best, and students need ready access to someone who can answer questions, assist with assignments, and maybe most important in the view of these facilitators, provide encouragement. "...they [students] will call you up and say I'm really having a hard time with this assignment, I know I can do it but I would like to talk about it..." Facilitators also provided structure in terms of schedules, meeting time, assignment time lines and due dates for the taped class sessions. Facilitators also noted the importance of study groups outside of the class time. Distance students participating in the program as a cohort often established their own study groups which provided another avenue of support.

Facilitator training and support. Facilitators talked about several things that helped them succeed in their role. Communication between the course facilitator and the campus professor was seen as critical. Sometimes facilitators need clarification about something that was said in class and other times it might be related to the assignments. Providing detailed instructors for

facilitators in the "facilitator packet" provided with the course materials was viewed as very helpful. Also, instructors need to provide distance site facilitators with instructions about how to grade assignments. This might be in the form of answer keys or model assignments. As one facilitator noted facilitator could provide, "maybe a little bit more guideline on some of these more...subjective aspects of correcting papers." Facilitators also appreciated having the opportunity to come to campus to meet faculty and discuss courses they would be facilitating. Training designed to assist them as they work with adult learners was also appreciated.

Summary

According to facilitators quality instruction is an amalgamation of interactive elements. It begins with knowledgeable, skilled, well prepared, and engaging instructors. It is contingent on meaningful collaboration with other support personnel, including instructional designers, camera operators, directors, producers, graphic artists, and others who contribute to the technical and production aspects of the televised course. And finally, quality television instruction is supported by well trained and knowledgeable facilitators who are very familiar with the course content, who clearly understand the expectations of the instructors, and who related well with learners individually and in small groups.

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